

Once we had landed, we started the process of preparing our delivery. Statues, pieces of art, and several other artifacts and relics, all of which were already sealed inside crates and containers, were stacked and carefully loaded onto hovercarts. Once all four of our prepared carts were loaded up, I directed our four pre-prepared labor droids to slowly guide the hovercarts to the cargo lift, which we boarded as well, all of us completely suited up in armor.

As the elevator descended, we got our first look at our gracious host. [Grakkus the Hutt](#) was huge, even for a Hutt, but it did not come from rolls of fat, but rather a massive muscular frame. It looked bizarre on a species widely considered to be oversized slugs, but it was impossible to ignore as he spread his arms to greet us. Hell, he had the beginning of a six-pack!

"Welcome, Skyforged, to my palace!" He said, his movement causing his necklace, a series of lightsabers strung together, to bounce and sway. "I am so glad you could join us!"

As he greeted us in a booming, gravelly voice, he slowly approached. I could hear and see his cybernetic limbs clanking against the ground, moving him forward at a speed impossible for most Hutts. I had no doubt, both from his looks and from what I knew from the stories, that Grakkus was not to be underestimated.

As if to confirm and emphasize that fact, when he stopped just before the shadow of the *Talos Chariot*, a dozen people fanned out from around him, taking defensive positions, though they stood as if at parade rest.

Ever since Grakkus had invited us to meet him, all of us had wondered what made him so confident in his safety that he would happily invite a mercenary group like ours to his home. Sure, he was bound to have security and bodyguards, but that didn't quite cut it. Now, however, we had that answer. A dozen Mandalorians, heavily armed and moving in a way that denoted training and experience, were on his payroll, ready and waiting to defend their employer.

"Thank you for the invitation, Lord Grakkus," I said, easily stepping off the cargo turbolift, even though it had about a foot left to descend. "We have brought you the latest delivery, as well as an early gift."

I gestured, and Ahsoka stepped forward, carrying a small display case with a clear top. She walked until she was standing beside me, tilting the case forward so that Grakkus could see what we had. His already large eyes went wide when he got a good look inside the case. Inside was the ancient lightsaber that Tatnia had found, moderately cleaned to show off its fantastic condition.

"This was found at the same dig site as the other artifacts but was considered too valuable to sell. One of my technologically inclined members managed to find its records and its location," I explained, spinning a complete lie. "We took it and replaced it with a replica before organizing an accident to befall said replica. The records stated that it may be the oldest find they have located in the dig site, and by all reports, it should still contain the original Kyber crystal. Though, I'm afraid the significance of that is beyond me, other than the monetary value."

Grakkus lost his composure for a moment, his cybernetic limbs tapping along the ground as he listened. By the end, he was practically licking his lips in greed and want, his eyes practically glowing. It was bad enough that the Mandalorians closest to him shifted uncomfortably.

"Truly, you spoil me, Deacon of the Skyforged." He said, nodding eagerly, rubbing his hands together. "And yet such initiative shows talent and drive you seldom see in mercenaries. Well done."

"I figured if we were going to abandon the client, then we might as well make sure the next one knew our worth," I explained, nodding as Ahsoka walked back and placed the display case on one of the hover carts. "I can only hope you are more reasonable than them."

Grakkus took a small step forward, almost as if to follow after Ahsoka, but he managed to regain his composure, which involved wiping some drool from the corner of his mouth. To hide his wanton greed, he chuckled and nodded.

"You need not worry about that. I would not dream of underpaying deserving fighters such as yourself," He assured me, though I trusted his word just about as far as I could throw him. "But please, we can discuss work later. You arrived just in time for an Arena match. True, it is only the scheduled fights, nothing unique, but your timing surely means it is fate. Come, you will watch from our private box."

The grandiose Hutt, clearly not even considering the possibility that I would deny his requests, immediately turned and began to walk away, his cadre of Mandalorians turning to walk with him. For a moment, I considered calling out to deny his request, but I held back. Half of our mission was already complete, that being getting down to the palace without being blown up or taken hostage. Every step closer we got to the vaults was just another step in our favor.

The Mandalorians were an interesting twist and clearly part of the reason Grakkus was so confident. I had to assume that he had fallen for the same propaganda that the rest of the universe had, that the Mandalorians were the galaxy's greatest fighters, both in equipment and in skill. Not that these Mandalorians were not skilled or tough. They were just unlikely to be as invincible as their general reputation claimed. My crew, on the other hand, was relatively unknown, and while we had enjoyed some early success, to a Hutt like Grakkus, we were easily dismissed as a story of beginner's luck.

I also had to assume that the nature of our armor hadn't managed to leak out just yet. The higher-ups of the Rebellion knew, as did a few others, so honestly, it was only a matter of time, but if the Mandalorians were being so casual and dismissive of us, then they had no idea what we were wearing. Not only would this much beskar normally be a massive affront to their people, it was also a considerable threat. We were clad in it entirely, something they would not approach casually, only armed with blasters.

"Stay tight, follow the procession, and stay alert," I ordered through our helmet comms. "I'll be chatting up Grakkus."

I got a series of clicks in response, confirming that my orders were heard and being followed. I idly noticed the crew had stepped closer as we began to move, and I moved ahead to stand beside the muscular Hutt, though not directly beside. He was absolutely the kind of bastard to be insulted by someone attempting to equate equality in any way.

As I passed some of the Mandalorians, I got a better look at what they were wearing and packing. Most of them had the usual Westar pistols on their hips, and the [Galaar-15](#) carbines held at the ready, though there was some variation. As for their armor, it varied greatly from person to person. Walking alongside Grakkus, opposite where I moved up to, was assumedly their leader, who was wearing nearly full beskar armor, with plates up and down his body. His subordinates all had chest plates, helmets, and jetpacks, as well as shoulder armor and vambraces. Quite a few of them had plates along their thighs, but only a few anything more.

What was interesting was that they all still had other armor covering their limbs, where beskar would normally be, it was just a different color. Considering the leader was covered in black plating with red highlights, I assumed that was what they painted the beskar, while the other plates were just a dull red. At a guess, I assumed that the dull red plates were temporary placeholders waiting to be replaced by earned beskar. Overall, there was a lot of black and red plating, meaning they were either incredibly lucky, or considerably skilled warriors.

Of course, their armor paled in comparison to ours, but they didn't need to know that. If it came down to a fight, which I was relatively sure it would, they had plenty of gaps in their armor that we didn't.

"Don't get overconfident," Ahsoka said suddenly through our comms. "I can feel your smugness through your armor."

"Keep the chatter down," I responded. "And it's not my fault our armor looks better."

As we continued to walk, a pair of Mandalorians split off from the procession to follow our delivery, guiding our labor droids deeper into the palace.

Grakkus talked almost nonstop as we made our way through his palace. As we made our way through the entrance and down the hall, he would gesture to various antiques and art that were on display. None of them were Jedi in origin, but it was still an impressive collection.

As we continued to walk down wide, open hallways, it was impossible to not see the similarities in design, following the same concept as the exterior. The colors and symbols were different, but between the high arches, banners, open spaces, and minimalist furniture, it was obvious that he was pulling inspiration from the Jedi Temple.

"I have to say, Lord Grakkus, your Palace is impressive," I commented as we stepped into a *massive* turbolift, one with plenty of room for all of my team, the remaining Mandalorians, *and* Grakkus.

"Do you recognize it?" He asked, turning as the doors along the turbolift shut, sealing us in.

"I do," I admitted. "The Emperor might like to pretend the Jedi never existed, but even he can't wipe it out of history entirely."

"My collection is proof enough of that," He added with a growling chuckle. "If you find this impressive, I believe you will be even more impressed by the vault."

That caught me off guard. While I was hoping to get a better idea of the security and layout of the building, I did not expect Grakkus to just walk us to the vault himself. It was actually concerning, because I couldn't imagine he would show that off to a group of ordinary mercenaries.

"You would let us see it?" I asked, looking over at the large, muscular Hutt.

"Of course! You will help fill it, after all!" He explained as if it was obvious. "It is only right that you see it first!"

He laughed, reaching out to slap my shoulder, nearly driving me forward into the turbolift door. I was pretty sure that if I hadn't been wearing so many strength-enhancing items, I would have left a dent in the metal in front of us. Even after I recovered, he continued to laugh. All the while, the Mandalorians stood silently.

"Do *not* get inside this fuckers arm's length," I said through the comms. "He hits like a fucking rancor."

I took solace in the series of confirming beeps, cursing under my breath as I pretended to be fine with the abuse. Before I had the chance to do anything, the doors opened to reveal we were descending into a massive gladiatorial stadium. It was absolutely gigantic, with room for thousands and thousands of people and a vast sand-filled fighting pit in the center. This place was clearly designed to host combat of all sorts, everything from fighting rancors to one-on-one duels.

We continued to descend, the turbolift eventually sliding into place on top of an extensive open, private VIP area. Serving droids moved about, setting up food and drinks. One immediately approached Grakkus, the large Hutt, taking a shining metallic cup off of a tray and drinking from it deeply. He continued on, moving further into the space until he reached a large viewing booth, one designed for a Hutt of his size and that overlooked the entire arena. Dozens of holoprojectors and screens displayed closer views of the sand pit, though the glass surrounding the viewing areas seemed to be naturally magnifying.

"Go, eat, drink, enjoy yourselves," the massive Hutt said with another laugh. "Consider it a celebration of a new partnership!"

"Thank you for your generosity, Lord Grakkus," I said with a bow. "If there is nothing else, I would go to my crew..."

The sizable muscular slug waved me off as if dismissing a peon. I had only known this crime lord for around fifteen minutes, and already I was considering killing him now, despite how

difficult it would make our mission. I managed to resist the urge, however, and left his side to head back to my team, who had already congregated in one of the viewing booths.

I could see the Mandalorians had already partially spread out as security, some of them remaining by their client's side.

As I approached my team, Tatnia turned to greet me, putting her hand on my shoulder and taking advantage of one of Miru and Pola's latest creations.

Comms systems, while fine for day-to-day communication, were not nearly as slicer-proof as necessary for vital communication. While equipment to intercept and slice comms was expensive and very illegal, we had been maintaining comms discipline to prevent giving anything away, since Grakkus would very likely have access to something like that, especially in his palace. Talking out loud wasn't much better since there was no doubt in my mind that this place was riddled with listening devices.

Because of this vulnerability, Miru and Pola worked together to install a direct contact point in the tips of two of our fingers. By placing one of each into a specific spot, namely two contact points on our shoulders, we could transmit sound directly between our suits, with no open or direct comms of any sort. It was obviously for close-range communications only, but it was still an invaluable little invention.

"Ahsoka says she can feel something, an enclosing threat," She explained through the direct link. "He is obviously going to betray us."

"But why? He hasn't gotten what he needs yet..." I responded.

"He probably assumes he can get it from our ship," Tatnia pointed out. "Or our pilot."

"So he assumes we are amateurs," I guessed, shaking our head. "Should have seen that coming, I suppose."

"What are we going to do?"

"Calima knows the plan, as do Racer and Boxi," I assured her. "We continue as we have been, keeping an eye out for however he plans on betraying us. If he tries to separate us or leave us alone, don't let him. From what I know about him, and from most Hutts... showing us his massive collection before turning on us is exactly something he would do."

"Which plays into our plan," She finished with a subtle nod. "Okay, we follow your lead."

She patted my shoulder and turned to sit in one of the comfortable-looking seats, sitting on the edge so she could easily spring to her feet. As she did, I stepped closer to Ahsoka, who was standing off to the side. I could tell by her stance she was partially meditating, reaching out to the Force to feel her surroundings. She shifted when I got close, and I put my hand on her shoulder.

"How are you doing? Tatnia says you can feel his intent to betray us?" I asked through the direct link.

"I can feel something. Hutts are notoriously difficult to read, but I can feel... something incoming. A tension and glee at his plan," She explained. "Also... The Mandalorians. They are uneasy."

"How so?"

"They... despise Grakkus. Just about as much as someone can," she explained, turning to look out of the booth and into the main VIP area. "When he slapped your shoulder and nearly knocked you off your feet? The leader was disgusted and sympathetic, and their constant distaste is almost palpable."

"Would you say they feel like they don't want to be here? Like they are being blackmailed?"

"You know as well as I do it doesn't work like that, Deacon," She responded. "You-"

She stopped mid-sentence and nodded behind me, prompting me to turn and look. Standing at the entrance of our booth was the Mandalorian leader, as well as two of his underlings.